



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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I was born on January 19, 1935 in Zywiec, Poland. My father owned a 3 stories building (4 apartments, 2 maids apartments 2 stores) and a factory. Behind the building was a garden and around it the factory. In the factory they were finishing and dying furs. We lived on the first floor, across of us lived my paternal grandmother. Above us lived my uncle Jules who was married to my mother's sister Paulina, they were childless. Across of them lived family friends and their two daughters. On the third floor lived the maids. The stores were rented.

We had a very good life. Twice a year, winter and summer, we were going away to the mountains, Zakopane. Not far from where we lived was a river and a mountain. We were swimming in the river and having pick nicks on the mountain. I have very nice memories from before the war.

Then came September 1939. What I remember from those days is chaos in the house. Everybody was nervous, running, packing. The next thing that I remember is my father coming in a peasant's wagon drawn by a horse. My mother throwing blankets, cloths, pots, ect. onto the wagon. We were six people: my mother, my sister (who was 10 years older than I) and my aunt sitting on top of all our belongings, my father and uncle in front controlling the horse.

We were heading to the Ukraine, running away from the German army. I remember coming into a little town. It must have been erev Rosh Hashanah. My mother went shopping for food and came back with a few potatoes, bread and onions. She was crying. The shop owner told her that the Jews emptied the store before their holiday.

My mother went to a Jewish family and begged them to let her boil some potatoes for the children but they did not have room for 1 pot. That night we ate bread and onions.

We continued our journey, crossed the border to Ukraine and arrived to a village. My father found a place to live. One room and a kitchen in a private house owned by a single Ukrainian woman. The room and kitchen were located in the back yard and under the house. My uncle and aunt left us because there was no room for them. I never saw them again.

Every morning my father and mother left for work. My father work in a forest cutting threes and my mother worked in a field picking potatoes and carrying 50 kg. sacks on her back. I stayed home with my sister.

Then started the Ukrainian pogroms. Fearing for our lives my parents enrolled me in a kindergarten and my sister in school. Not for long. We were miserable and abused by the other children. My mother had to stay home with us.

One day a young German soldier came to us asking for some water to shave. My mother spoke perfect German and asked him if he would like cold or warm water. He was very surprised and said: "I didn't know that the Jews are such nice people". While he was shaving a few Ukrainian thugs came in looking for Jews. The soldier told them that there are no Jews here and that they shouldn't dare to show their faces again in this place. So, a German soldier saved our lives.

After this incident my father, who was considered a very smart man, decided that the place was not safe for us. He said that he prefers a slap from Hitler than a kiss from Stalin. And so we went back to Poland.

I don't remember anything from our journey. I know that we arrived to Warsaw. Probably through some connections, my father arranged for my mother and me to stay with a gentile family under a false name. We were supposed to be their relatives from a village. My father did not find a place to hide so together with my sister he went to Ghetto Tarnow. I don't know how long we stayed with this family. Mother became their housekeeper.

In the middle of a night there was banging on the door. Two policemen, one German and one Polish, came in asking where are the Jews? Mother and I came out in our nightgowns; they put us against the wall pointing their guns at us. At this point I made a pipi on the floor. Obviously they took pity on us and told us to be out of the apartment by five o'clock in the morning. The people who hid us gave us an address where a single woman lived.

It was very weird to be out after a long time and we were afraid to be stopped at any moment. But we were lucky and we made it to the woman's apartment located next to the Warsaw Ghetto. We could see the Ghetto from the kitchen window. The woman worked, so during the day we had to be very quiet and could not use the bathroom. Here again I don't remember how long we stayed there.

One day, must have been April 1943, we heard shouts, gunshots, people running on the streets in the Ghetto, people on the roofs trying to get out of the Ghetto. Mother understood that something bad is happening. Because of the proximity of the Ghetto she knew that the first place the Gestapo would look for the Jews is in the buildings surrounding the Ghetto. She decided to leave.

I have no recollection what happened next. What I remember is being shoved with mother into a truck, being covered with hay and other stuff. We could hardly breathe. It was a long drive with a few stops. Every stop we thought that we would be discovered. Finally we arrived at our destination and were reunited with father and sister in Ghetto Tarnow.

The apartment my father and sister lived in was shared with 3 other families. Every morning the people who were able to work were taken out of the Ghetto and into different factories and places to work. My father and sister went to work every morning.

One day there was an "Action" (that's how the Germans called it). The Gestapo went from building to building, gather people (mostly women and children) who did not go to work and either kill them or send them to Auschwitz.

In anticipation of such an "Action", the people who lived in the apartment prepared a hiding place. They put a breakfront against the bathroom door, made a small sliding door in the back of the breakfront. We could crawl through it into the bathroom. A few days after we arrived there was an "Action". We were warned and crawled into the bathroom. The last person in put some pillows and other stuff to cover the door. We were 4 women, 5 children and one baby. We heard the Germans going through the apartment and the baby started to cry. The mother covered his face with a pillow and the baby died.

In the Ghetto there was a "Judenrat" – a committee of Jews to administrate Jewish affairs. Failure to join meant death but by joining you became a collaborator of the Nazis. Some of the administrators were decent people and tried to help, others were glad to comply. At the end they were all killed.

I think that my father knew one of the decent ones. After the "Action" he arrange for my mother to work in a factory where they were mending sweaters, socks and gloves for the German army. Fearing for my life, mother smuggled me under her coat out of the Ghetto and into the factory. There I sat under the table hidden by the women who sat around the table. I was not allowed to speak or to move. Mom gave me some socks and gloves to mend and I did it very well.

I don't remember how long it went on. Than it became dangerous to take me out of the Ghetto. If we stayed in the Ghetto we were doomed. While father went to work he contacted a peasant who agreed to hide mother and me.

If somebody was sick he was allowed to go to a hospital out of the Ghetto. Mother put cotton in my mouth it should look like swollen, covered my head and half my face with a rag and told the guard that I have an infected tooth and it has to come out. He let us go. We followed the direction father gave us, met the peasant and his wagon, crawled under the hay and arrived safely to his farm not far from Tarnow.

The farm was in a village called Mogila and the name of the peasants was Knapik.

A few days later, when our peasant went to the outhouse he discovered my father hiding there covered with blood, his face swollen. He jumped out of the train heading to Auschwitz through the tiny opening in the train. Because he was injured and needed care he was smuggled to the hospital and after a few days returned to the Ghetto and work.

There were rumors that the peasant is sheltering Jews, so we had to leave.

A place was found for mother in Warsaw by a couple, Helena and Wincenty Pasternak. They had a stand in the market and were selling onions. I went to a woman in Tarnow. As

long as the Ghetto was in existence she kept me. Probably she was getting money from my father. The day the Ghetto was liquidated she took me to the train station and delivered me to mother in Warsaw.

When we were waiting for the train to Warsaw, the transport to Auschwitz entered the station. It was standing there for quite a while. I swear that I saw the face of my father at the small opening. This picture stays with me all the time. It was September 1943.

Mother was very worried, she didn't know if they would take me in but they had pity and let me stay. They lived in a 2 room, a small kitchen, a bathroom and a basement. The entrance to the basement was through a trap door in the floor of one of the rooms and it was covered with a rug. In the basement they kept rabbits, a few empty barrels and some other stuff.

The entrance to the apartment was from the yard. There were 5-6 steps, so the apartment was high and nobody could peak through the window. We had to be very still, we could not use the bathroom nor make any noise what so ever. Only when they came home could we move, talk and relieve ourselves. They were very simple people, they didn't have much but each Saturday after they closed the business they went to drink. If they drank together everything was fine. They came home in a good mood. But if he drank alone with his buddies' things were bad. She was mad as hell and screamed at him: Wincenty prepare your ass! She used to beat him up with a piece of leather that he was sharpening his razor on. He was crying and we were afraid that a neighbor might come in. Although we were trained to go down to the basement in no time it was still dangerous. To help them out financially, she used to bring yarn from people and we were knitting sweaters, hats, socks, gloves etc.. at least this kept us busy.

There was no food in the house except onions. The neighbors were bringing crusts of bread for the rabbits, mother would steal some of it and together with some onions this was our meal. Sometimes, on a Sunday they would invite us to share their meal.

The neighbors must have heard something because they approach them saying that there is somebody in their apartment. In order to prove that there is nobody they invited them to dinner. They hid us in the basement behind the barrels. After dinner they brought them down with their children to see the rabbits. Thank God nobody looked behind the barrels.

For a time everything was quiet. Than the rumors started again. They invited another neighbor and two boys. This time they hid us in a corner behind a closet. We were in the same room as their guests. We could hear their conversation which of course was about the Jews: how they would like to put their hands on some Jews and kill them, how wonderful it is that Hitler takes care of the Jewish problem and so on. Of course there was heavy drinking.

After the meal the boys started playing ball. A ball came under the closet where we were standing. Mother had the presence of mind to kick the ball back. If one of the boys had looked under the closet he would have seen our feet.

In 1944 the Russians were approaching Warsaw. The Polish underground decided to come out and fight the Germans. The Russians didn't like it and stayed at the entrance to Warsaw. We had to leave the apartment because the building was located near a refinery and it might have exploded during the fighting. While waking on the street a young man grabbed mother and asked her if she knows how to cook. The answer was yes. Mother became the cook of the underground. Finally we had enough food. Of course they didn't know that we were Jewish.

The fight was from street to street from building to building. It was dangerous to cross the street. Our unit was located in an apartment on the third floor. I became very ill, I had a high fever, but there was no doctor around. Mother cured me with hot tea. While I was sick in bed, mother was cooking in the kitchen. A projectile hit the building. The front of the building was gone. The room I was in was completely destroyed, only a piece of floor was left where my bed stood. Luckily when I heard the boom I covered myself with the blanket. Mother came running to check if I am still alive but couldn't open the door. I t was stuck. They had to break the door. When they came in they found a piece of floor, the bed almost hanging in the air and covered with debris. I remember mother screaming, I felt somebody throwing the debris away and than I was in the arms of one of the fighters. I became a sensation because Jesus saved me.

After 63 days of heavy fighting and a lot of casualties the underground gave up. The Germans rounded up the whole population of Warsaw and march us to a train station. We were sure that we were going to die. We were put on a train squeezed like sardines. No body new where we were going. After a long time the train came to a stop. We were ordered to disembark. Many people were standing at the station waiting for the train. It came out that the people from this small town (I don't remember the name) were ordered to take in a family. The mayor of this town took us because he had a boy my age and a baby. We were sleeping by a woman who was very religious so we had to play our part and pray to Jesus morning and night. During the day mother was the housekeeper at the mayor's house and I was supposed to play with his son and watch the baby. We stayed there till the end of the war.

Before leaving, the mayor gave us some money for the trip and we headed home. Walking from the train station in Zywiec we received a very warm welcome: Oh! Look at that, Hitler promised us to kill all the Jews and here they are coming back! Our apartment in our building was occupied by one of the workers from the factory. Of course they wouldn't leave. As a great favor we were allowed to stay in the maid's room.

I was registered to 4th grade. Mother was afraid that the kids would beat me up so she told the school principal that I was converted during the war. I became the priest favorite; of course I had to go to church every Sunday and eventually to the First Communion.

Mother wrote a letter to my aunt in Switzerland, she did not remember their address and wrote only the name and the town. The letter was delivered. Through them we received the address of my aunt in the States. They sent us packages of food, cloths and items that mother was able to sell. They also submitted papers for us to come to the States. They

wanted us to leave Poland as soon as possible. Through a friend of theirs in Sweden, papers were arranged for us to travel to Stockholm. We left Poland on January 1947. The train was packed; the conversation was about the Jews. Too many of them are coming back; they should be killed and thrown out of the train. There were 3 nuns in our compartment. In order to avoid any suspicion mother asked the nuns to take me to where they were standing because there was a little more room.

The passage to Sweden was very rough. It was January and the sea was frozen. We were so sick that when the authorities in Stockholm came on the boat to check the papers, after seeing our condition, they didn't bother to check anything.

We were waiting in Sweden for the papers to America. After 8 months the papers still didn't come. My aunt from Switzerland invited us to come and wait for the papers there. I learned French and was sent to a private school for kindergarten teachers.

After 3 years in Switzerland the papers from the States still didn't come. As mother was not allowed to work in Switzerland, she decided that enough is enough and we left for Israel. My uncle left Poland before the war and went to Palestine. He lived with his family in Tel-Aviv. He bought a small house in the suburbs and let us live there. I went to Ulpan (a school for new immigrants to learn Hebrew). Then I went to a Seminar in order to receive an Israeli kindergarten teacher's license. I work as a kindergarten teacher one year and then went to the army, intelligence department.

After almost 2 years of service I was married. We lived in Israel 30 years, 2 of our 3 boys served in the Israeli army. One was wounded in the Lebanon war. In 1982 we immigrated to the States.

Note:

My father, my sister and almost all the members of my family were murdered during the war.

Unfortunately, this is all that I remember. My mother, like so many other survivors, didn't want to talk about the Holocaust. Whenever I questioned her she would reply: "forget about it, let it go". Then she became sick, she had Dementia and there was nobody to talk to. She was sick 11 years. Through her sickness she was looking for her husband and "the other daughter".